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Tim Clark: Carrying on Tradition at Clark-Ehre

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Tim Clark has no trouble remembering the day he was introduced to the family produce business. One Saturday when he was seven, his father shook him awake at 3:30 a.m. and said, "Son, we're going to work."

That was 30 years ago. Today, Clark is owner of Clark-Ehre Produce Co., supplying fresh fruits and vegetables to restaurants, hotels and institutions.

In the 10 years he has headed the company, annual sales have mushroomed from \$1 million to over \$9 million. Success has not come easily, and there have been a host of obstacles to hurdle. But Clark believes in tackling problems head-on. Confident of his expertise in buying and selling produce, he has turned to professionals in other areas as the company has grown from a small operation to a major company. Always open to new ideas, he has not been afraid to innovate -- from introducing new products into the marketplace to finding better ways of running his business.

Clark-Ehre Produce Co. dates back to 1916 when Tim Clark's grandfather Isaac, a telegraph operator in Galveston, began selling fresh fruits and vegetables. A few years later he teamed up with Michael Ehre in Houston to start a produce company on Commerce Street. Ehre died in 1920, leaving Clark the sole owner.

Isaac Clark raised both of his sons in the business, and when he died 35 years ago they took charge of Clark-Ehre. In 1954, the company became the first to open on Produce Row in Southeast Houston.

Following their father's example, Isaac Clark's two sons raised their own sons in the business. "I was the only one who liked it," notes today's owner. "Mr. Willie (a company employee) trained us," he reminisces. "He taught us the nuts and bolts of the business -- how to lift, how to tell mustard greens from collard greens . . . We had to learn every blue collar job associated with the company. I've been a truck driver, a receiver on the dock."

By the time Tim Clark graduated from high school, he had spent all his summer vacations and spring breaks working at Clark-Ehre, and he was certain of one thing -- he didn't want to work in the produce business for the rest of his life. "You have to sweat, you're in and out of kitchens . . . I thought it was an unglamorous way of making a living."

So he went to the University of Houston intending to become a lawyer, later changing his major to hotel and restaurant management. When his father suffered a stroke, Clark dropped out of school to help care for him. By then, the young student was disillusioned with college -- and increasingly unsure of what career he wanted to pursue.

Over the next few years he tried several ventures, including investing in the club business and selling commercial real estate. Clark candidly admits he was far from successful in real estate sales. "I went broke. I thought I could just jump in and do it." The next few months of his life were tough. First, he and his wife of two years divorced. Then his father died. Soon afterward, his uncle, co-owner of Clark-Ehre, died also, leaving the produce company to be run by a hired manager.

Recalling his dire financial predicament at the time, Clark said, "I needed to get a paycheck. I had to apply for a job to one of our own employees."

In early 1975, Tim Clark's side of the family bought out his cousins' share of the produce business, facilitated by "an aggressive banker who gave us the financing." By then, 25-year-old Clark, who became president of Clark-Ehre, was eager to put his own stamp on the company, leading it in expansion and modernization. His father and uncle had purposely kept the company small, limiting the scope of the business to high-quality, high-priced restaurants and clubs. "They had willingly passed up opportunities to grow," Clark explains. "They didn't want to give up their personal freedom."

While the new president wanted to retain Clark-Ehre's old customers, he had a broader vision of the future. But first, he had to solidify the company's base. "We had a lot of work to do. The company had suffered (without the leadership of the co-owners during their illnesses). We had 10 broken-down trucks, only one person handling sales, and no new product lines."

Working 18-hour days, Clark made great strides in turning the company around -- just in time to accept an offer from Marriott to be the sole supplier of produce for its 29 Houston properties. "This place changed in six weeks," he recalls. "We became a major force in the market."

But as the "quiet little company" took giant steps, Clark felt he was losing control. "It was like having a tiger by the tail." Before long, he called in a management consulting company to teach him what he needed to know. Then he hired a business manager. ("I didn't care if he could recognize a head of lettuce . . . I knew produce. I needed someone who knew business.)

Meanwhile, Clark-Ehre had added processed foods, prepared in-house, to its products. And Tim Clark had cracked the door to a segment of the marketplace which he had enthusiastically pursued -- selling exotic foods grown in foreign countries. "International trade is glamorous, exciting. I knew I wanted to get involved in it."

Today, he supplies customers with such specialities as shallots from France, radicchio from Italy, salsify from Belgium and bell peppers from Holland. But he remembers almost throwing in the towel when his first venture into international trade didn't pay off. In theory, the plan was good. He would import New Zealand strawberries in November and December, a time of the year when the berries are not available from domestic growers. But weather conditions that year were unusual, resulting in a longer growing season in California. Since the domestic fruit could be priced lower than the imported, Clark "took a bath and a half."

Discouraged, he nearly scrapped plans for developing a local market for New Zealand berries. But his brother advised him that "it's not good to get up and leave a card game early," so he decided to give the strawberries one more try. This time he succeeded. "I was like a kid in a candy store.

I started looking around for what else I could import."

Although exotic produce and processed foods account for only a small percentage of Clark-Ehre's overall business, these two specialties make the company more valuable to its customers and give it greater credibility, explains Clark. "The money is still in lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes and onions -- just like in my grandfather's day. But these enhancements allow us to get accounts that we might not have gotten."

Continuing to diversify, this entrepreneurial produce **supplier** recently added fruit baskets to the company's list of offerings. "We did a lot of research and decided there is a niche for selling fruit baskets year-round." Clark-Ehre will market the new product through florists as well as directly to the business community.

Clark's philosophy of diversification extends past the products he sells to the range of customers he serves. The company's client list includes fast food chains and school districts as well as such top-priced restaurants as Tony's, Maxim's and Le Restaurant de France. "When the 'white tables' are hurting, the fast food restaurants are doing well," he notes. "I would hate to have all my eggs in one basket."

Developing an expansionist philosophy, with diversity at its root, seems to come naturally to Clark. But there have been lessons to learn, he admits. In the late 1970s his company was losing money. "I had lost control of the operating expenses, and we were selling at too low a margin," he explains. Yet, Clark is not afraid to admit mistakes. "Just show me the right way to turn the screws," he told the new accountant he hired to help him rectify the business reverses. Today, he advises others who operate their own companies "to watch the numbers," adding, "you may not like what you see, but the only thing worse than seeing bad numbers is not seeing them at all."

Having continued growth as his goal, Clark talks about the future. Currently, he is in the process of acquiring another produce company, which will increase Clark-Ehre's buying power and add a distribution center. And he continues to research new products on the world market. "I can't wait to get to work in the mornings. It's challenging -- you have to think fast, react fast. Every day is different."

Tim Clark has a 4-year-old son, Danny, who got the jump on his dad by starting to work at Clark-Ehre even younger than his father. Fondly, Clark notes that Danny rides with one of the drivers he himself rode with years ago when learning the business. Unlike the company's present owner, who once regarded working at a produce company as unexciting, Danny is so enchanted with the job he has invented a produce company of his own, with himself as president.

When his father asked who was going to drive his company's truck, the boy answered with the name of one of Clark-Ehre's drivers. "So," said Tim Clark, "you've started a competing business, and you've stolen one of my drivers. I go to work every morning at 6:30. What time are you going to work?"

Thoughtfully, the potential fourth-generation produce supplier pondered the question. "Right after Mr. Rogers," was his reply.

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